BOSTON HERALD- AMERICAN (MA)
12 December 1980

The CIA: Why Reagan will need it more than past presidents

Some believe the CIA spies on American campuses, owns the press and operates big business overseas . . . Running America's institutions is about as appealing to the CIA as bicycles are to fish.

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If Ronald Reagan does as he promised and returns America's foreign policy toward the Soviet Union to you-or-me configurations, he will have a greater need for a Central Intelligence Agency that can produce the truth about Soviet intent than any previous administration ever had.

The Nixon Doctrine and Carter's human rights policies announced for the world that America would not always back its play; we did not enter the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict, nor did we intervene physically in Angola, South Africa, or Afghanistan. Nixon and Carter made it possible for us to stay away from those conflicts we could lose. Neither had to rely completely on the CIA's Soviet product.

Nixon, for example, was able to substitute Henry Kissinger's hunches for agency data and when such didn't work, it didn't really matter since he had pried America loose from commitments to engage the Soviets militarily whatever the issue. Carter, too, could follow hunches instead of data, which he did, losing on Salt II, the Russian brigade in Cuba and in Iran.

But Reagan will alter policy, he says. For him, hard data will have to be accurate.

Fortunately, there is no organization outside the Kremlin that knows as much about the Soviet Union as the CIA, and none distills information as quickly into formats for decision making. But effectiveness of the CIA's machinery, like that of most Washington bureaucracies, rests ultimately with parameters drawn for its success by the will of the American people.

Since Watergate, many Americans have wanted the CIA to fail. To survive attacks, the CIA purged its ranks of old hands, coughed up that side of its history it was ashamed of (Castro assassination attempts, LSD experiments, Chile), reduced "dirty tricks" to games Emily Post might accept, and opened itself to Congress so cooperatively that today America's intelligence apparatus is almost a scion of the legislative process. No longer can an American President consider covert action without bringing Congress in on the caper.

In spite of transformations, the CIA remains suspect. Some believe the CIA spies on American campuses, owns the press and operates big business overseas. Not only does it not have the resources to control these institutions, but to do so would be to set up so many barriers between its organizational capabilities and the work it really wants to get done, CIA personnel would be jumping ship to the last man. Running America's institutions is about as appealing to the CIA as bicycles are to fish.

The CIA has to know the rest of the world, and to trim its knowledge to essentials needed for government decision making. Its clandestine operations should be for this purpose only, and not for manipulation of other governments. Many believe the CIA should also act covertly to prevent illegal actions against America's legitimate interests and those of the free world.

Given today's view of Soviet intent and President-elect Reagan's already known willingness to consider intervention as a foreign policy option, the covert side of the CIA house is likely to get marching orders to operate just so and in full force. However, given what the Republican Party learned from Watergate, there is equal assurance that Reagan will also demand strictest adherence to rules about keeping America from embarrassment and about keeping Congress as a partner.

Yet the CIA can be dulled, if too many Americans perceive it as a power seeker interested in converting the world to cloaks and daggers. Information about what the CIA does overseas is now available to Americans at various levels of authorized access on a need-to-know basis. Much can be obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. Americans can participate more than ever in oversight programs

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